3:Honigmann and Honigmann-5 (1944-1945)1947
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A Kaska Oracle

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Sir,—The following information may be of interest to your readers: it was obtained in the course of field work with the Kaska undertaken in 1944 and 1945 under grants provided to the senior of us by the Department of Anthropology, Yale University and the Yale Peabody Museum. Contact with the four tribes constituting the Kaska nation was made at Lower Post, B.C., on the Alaska Highway.

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Like many other people the Kaska Indians, an Athapaskan-speaking group living in northern British Columbia and southern Yukon Territory, Canada, know a number of

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224 oracles and omens which function in allaying the uncertainties of the future. The Kaska today are a hunting and trapping people who, economically, are extremely dependent on the sale of raw furs trapped through the winter. While we were living with one family of Upper Liard River Indians, our host, Old Man, was prevented from visiting his traps by the illness of his wife. For several days he fretted at his enforced delay and wondered about his success. Finally, one afternoon in late November, he said he would ascertain how many lynx were in his traps and thereupon performed the oracle which one of us observed. We are not aware that any string oracles have hitherto been described for a Northern Athapaskan people.

Taking a piece of red spruce he whittles a smooth round

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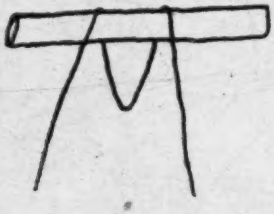
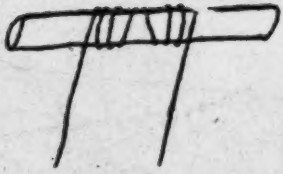


A



B

FIG. 1.—WINDING THE STRING

stick about eight inches long and about three-quarters of an inch in diameter. He then secures a piece of cotton twine about two yards long which is doubled without tying the ends. The folded end of the string is placed across the stick. The entire string is then wound around the stick (Fig. 1, A). This is done first by holding the overlapping portion of the string with the fingers and then turning the stick until the remainder of the line has been wound into place. The two strands of line are at first kept separate in this process, each passing around the wood on either side of the folded end (B). Later the winding is done less painstakingly. When the entire length is wound around the stick, Old Man places the wrapped portion of the wood between his palms and twirls it once or twice in the direction that would not unwind the string. Ordinarily, Old Man explained, the device should be placed under one's pillow for an hour, but in this instance he put it away for only twenty minutes and then began to unwind the line in order to learn his 'fortune.'

In unwinding the oracle the two strands of string are thrown in the opposite direction from which they had been put on the stick. If, when the end of the line is reached, the string immediately falls from the stick (as should logically happen) the trapper is advised that there are no lynx in his traps (Fig. 2, A). If, however, instead of falling free, the stick is found passing through the folded end of the string (B), the oracle is interpreted as promising one lynx to the trapper.

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787 If the string is bent around the stick twice (C), two lynx are indicated. Sometimes the line is found bent across the stick once and in addition a strand of line is found crossed under itself (D). This indicates that the man's traps contain one lynx plus one other species of fur. The trapper consulting the oracle may use it to determine the presence of whatever fur he specifies. He may also perform the oracle to learn another person's luck, and Old Man did this for his son-in-law, Hans, who was already away on his trap line. In Old Man's case the oracle promised him one lynx and some other species of fur; unfortunately when he left several days later he found his traps completely bare of fur. In Hans's case, however, the promised two lynx were duly found in the young man's traps.

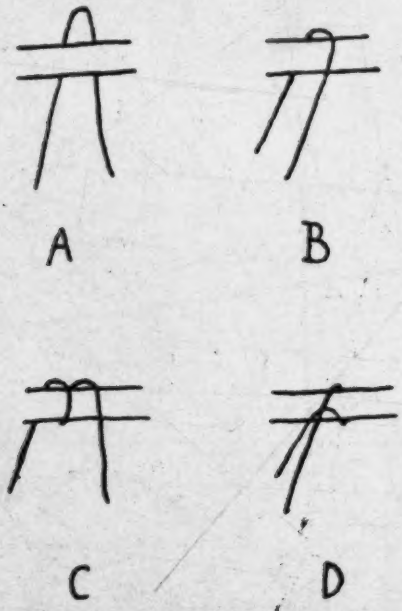

FIG. 2.—UNWINDING THE FOUR ANSWERS

787 Depending on conscious or unconscious sleight of hand in
756 unwinding the line—that is, one strand of line is one or more times flipped across the stick independently of its companion—this oracle was used in the aboriginal society by individuals who, by virtue of being befriended by a supernatural animal power, enjoyed the status of shamans. Such persons knew a variety of spectacular conjurations and often matched their skills in competitive contests. For examples, see Osgood, C., 'The Ethnography of the Tanaina,' *Yale University Publications in Anthropology*, No. 16, New Haven, 1937, pp. 180–181.

787 Other forms of divination and revelation in use among the Kaska are not many. They include, however, consulting tea leaves to learn a hunter's prospects, as well as prophecy through the interpretation of dreams and by intuition. Aboriginally scapulimancy was a common feature of this as well as other Northern Athapaskan people. People also have their decisions confirmed by fire. That is, a man who is undecided about a course of action may hear a camp- or stove-fire cracking. 'When you think of something and fire crack,' our informant explained, 'that's ghost telling you "yes" or "no." He knows your mind. If you want to hunt, he tell you "kling, kling—hurry up." Sometimes he says "yes" or "no." You just guess it, that's all.

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[p. 140 (b)]

[Errata: should be spelled Honigmann.-A]